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As the state Legislature attempts to hammer out a new transportation funding bill in Springfield, a bipartisan clamor is rising in favor of the rights of the new "suburban majority."

Although collar county population rates have soared and Chicago's population has decreased over the past 20 years, the bulk of mass transit funding goes to the Chicago Transit Authority, which is now in the midst of a pension crisis.

U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, and Melissa Bean, D-Barrington, lead a Suburban Transportation Commission meeting in Libertyville.

In an attempt to assure that suburban transit needs are adequately addressed in future funding formulas, U.S. Rep, Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, and U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean, D-Barrington, have formed a new Suburban Transportation Commission.

"Suburb-to-suburb commuting has increased 56 percent while traditional suburb-to-city commuting increased only 9 percent," Kirk said Tuesday at the panel's first meeting, held at Lake County Division of Transportation headquarters in Libertyville. "Our transportation plans should set a priority on the needs of the new suburban majority where our economy is growing fastest."

"We want to make sure that suburban priorities are given full consideration by all of the transit agencies," Bean said to an audience that included RTA Chairman Jim Reilly, Metra Executive Director Phil Pagano and former Gurnee Mayor Richard Welton representing Pace.

Kirk noted that while Metra suburban ridership revenue is up, CTA ridership revenue in the city is falling, yet "for every four tax dollars given to Metra and Pace, sic dollars is given to the CTA."

Reilly responded that the RTA's proposed Moving Beyond Congestion initiative calls for a \$10

billion capital investment in state and local dollars, and that 50 percent of that amount would be devoted to Metra and Pace under the plan.

Responding to a question from Kirk, Reilly said the RTA would not attempt to bail out the CTA's pension problems with suburban tax money.

Pagano said Metra has made strides to address demographic change, including the highly successful expansion of Metra's North Central Route from Antioch to Chicago, partly financed with federal funds obtained by Kirk and Bean. But he acknowledged system-wide change is needed.

"We do a good job moving people from the suburbs to the city. We do not do a good job when you're talking about reverse commuting and inter-suburb commuting," Pagano said.

Lake County Division of Transportation Director Martin Buehler said paratransit bus service, for seniors, the disabled and the general public, leaves a lot to be desired in Lake County and other suburban areas.

"If we're talking about priorities, I think that one rises to the top in suburban areas," Buehler said.

Welton said that Pace has gone out for bids on a needs assessment study and plan for county-wide paratransit service in Lake County, and that the study should be completed in six to nine months.

The program will be called "Ride Lake County," he said, adding that both grant funding and local funding will be needed for it to move forward.

In addition to Kirk and Bean, members of the new commission include state Sen. Michael Bond, D-Grayslake, state Rep. Ed Sullivan Jr., R-Mundelein, Long Grove Mayor Maria Rodriguez,

Round Lake Mayor Bill Gentes, Charlie Eldredge, director of the McHenry County Economic Development Corporation, and Chris Robling of Jayne Thompson and Associates.